

Eldorado National Forest Public Motor Vehicle Route Designation Project

Techniques: combined the mandated public involvement environmental impact statement (EIS) process under NEPA with a transparent process of early involvement, inviting the public (individuals or groups) to schedule appointments with the project leader and other staff, holding biweekly conference call briefings and discussions to keep the public up to date and answer questions, posted comments and responses on the project website, held open houses, established a project e-mail address and hotline to make it easy to comment, and published newsletters as well as provided required notices.

The uniqueness of the process described following is the high level of innovative public involvement opportunities throughout the NEPA process, which is rare for Forest Service to initiate. The combination of traditional, mandated public involvement opportunities related to NEPA with non-traditional, innovative techniques during the NEPA process has led to a process of information-sharing, constant feedback, and appropriate adjustments to resolve and reduce issues before the draft EIS is released. As a result of the openness in this process, the public has seen how their input is used and that it has had an influence. Although those who participate may not get everything they want in the end, Forest Service staff believe that people will be able to “live with” whatever final decision is made (within reason) because of the transparency of the process.

The Eldorado National Forest (ENF) is currently in the process of conducting a forest-wide EIS to designate routes for public motor vehicle use. This process was mandated by a U.S. District Court ruling, which found the Forest’s 1990 plan to be in violation of NEPA. The February 2005 court ruling ordered the Forest to complete the EIS by December 31, 2007, and the Forest Supervisor ordered the Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) to complete the EIS by December 31, 2006 (one-year timeline). Because of the aggressive timeline set for project, a public involvement schedule and process was developed to ensure ample opportunity for public involvement throughout the NEPA process. The process focused on being open, honest, and transparent, rather than inherently collaborative. The primary objectives of this level of involvement was to: (1) engage and involve the public to the extent possible; (2) provide insight to internal decision-making processes to help build understanding and trust; (3) help the public learn, understand, and build knowledge about the process so that they could be effective participants; and (4) have proactive outreach and innovative public meetings to provide additional opportunity for public input to and discussion with agency officials.

Prior to releasing the Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare a forest-wide EIS to designate routes for public motor vehicle use, the ENF Forest Supervisor and route designation team leader met with approximately 12 key stakeholders to discuss the timeline for the route designation process, the public involvement process for the project, and the Forest Supervisor’s intention to release an agency proposed action that included all of the National Forest System (NFS) roads and trails on the ENF, as well as a select number of Non-NFS routes identified through public and District employee input. The key stakeholders generally accepted this approach and were pleased that the Forest Supervisor took the time to meet with them and was candid in his remarks.

Two public meetings were then held on September 14 and 15, 2005, in Placerville and Jackson, CA, respectively, to present the information previously described, as well as solicit public input to help the Forest develop the purpose and need for the project. Approximately 60 people attended the Placerville meeting, and approximately 40 people attended the Jackson meeting. This step was important because the purpose and need outlines the boundaries for the alternatives to the agency's proposed action that are considered in detail. Public input was recorded at both of these meetings, reviewed by the Forest Supervisor and route designation team leader, and posted on the ENF route designation website with responses of how the input was or was not used to further develop the purpose and need (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/eldorado/projects/route/index.shtml>). On page 61779 of the NOI under the section titled "Meet Additional Purpose and Needs Identified from Public Input", there are five additional elements that were added to the purpose and need as a result of public input.

The Notice of Intent (NOI) was published in the Federal Register on October 26, 2005. The NOI asked for public comment on the proposal from October 26, 2005, to December 1, 2005. Approximately 140 public letters were received during this time period. On December 14, 2005, a public meeting was held in Placerville, CA, to explain how the public comments were used to develop significant issues that would eventually be used to develop alternatives to the agency proposed action, to present a draft list of significant issues, and to solicit public input on the draft list to ensure that the list adequately captured public concern. Approximately 110 people attended this meeting. Comments were recorded at this meeting, reviewed by the Forest Supervisor and route designation team leader, and posted on the ENF route designation website with responses of how the input was or was not used to further develop the list of significant issues (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/eldorado/projects/route/index.shtml>).

In addition to this meeting, the route designation team leader held a meeting upon request with key stakeholders of various off-highway vehicles (OHV) groups on November 20, 2005, to discuss their concerns about the proposed seasonal closure. The issue was discussed, and the comments from the groups were recorded and later reviewed as public comments in response to the NOI. The route designation interdisciplinary team reviewed all of these comments together and developed a list of issues to be addressed in alternatives to the agency proposed action.

On June 6 and 8, public open houses were held in Placerville and Jackson, CA, respectively, to present a preliminary range of alternatives to the agency proposed action prior to release of the draft EIS, explain how they were developed, and answer questions that the public had about their development. After the presentation, the public was able to view the preliminary alternative maps and have discussions with various Forest staff members. Comment cards were also collected at the meeting, reviewed by the Forest Supervisor and route designation team leader, and posted on the ENF route designation website with responses to concerns or questions. After the open houses, the public was then invited to visit the route designation team leader and other IDT staff individually or as groups at the ENF Forest Supervisor's Office in Placerville, CA, from June 15 to June 30. Approximately, 32 individuals and groups made appointments and visited with the staff for various amounts of time. The staff answered all questions, provided information requested, discussed specific routes and other concerns about the preliminary alternatives, and recorded the comments. On July 27, 2006, the route designation team leader met upon request with various stakeholders of environmental groups at the ENF Forest Supervisor's Office in Placerville, CA, from 6 pm to 9 pm to

discuss the preliminary alternatives and specific routes in the alternatives of concern. A number of public field trips were also held to visit areas and routes where the public identified issues or the IDT recognized resource concerns. The IDT reviewed the comments from these open houses and meetings and revised the preliminary alternatives as appropriate. On October 10, 2006, the alternatives to be considered in detail were finalized by the Forest Supervisor and posted on the Forest website for public review.

In addition to these efforts, several communication methods have been used continuously throughout the route designation process to disseminate information, address public concerns and questions, and solicit public input. Since August 16, 2005, the route designation team leader has held bi-weekly conference call briefings with the public every other Tuesday at noon to update the public on project status and other information, and to answer at least one question per conference call attendee from the public. The number of conference call participants, questions asked, and responses given have been posted on the ENF website for each conference call. A reminder about the conference call dates and times are sent out every Thursday and Monday prior to the Tuesday conference call, as well as posted on the ENF route designation website. The Forest also has a project email address that the public can use to send concerns and questions, a project hotline that the public can use to call to express concerns and ask questions, and a project webpage that posts maps, information, and other project documents. Numerous news releases, project newsletters, and other information have been sent to the project email list and mailing list throughout the process to provide information, clarify public questions, and help the public participate more effectively.

Following is the EIS Public Involvement Schedule:

Public involvement during the NEPA process will be extensive. The Forest Supervisor plans to have an open, honest, and transparent process that includes proactive outreach and innovative public meetings. The primary objective of this level of involvement is to: (1) engage and involve the public; (2) allow the interested public to observe internal decision-making processes to help build understanding and trust; and (3) help the public understand, learn, and build knowledge so that they can be effective participants in the motorized vehicle route designation process. The following public involvement activities will occur during the NEPA process.

Activity	Date	Objective	Audience
Bi-weekly Telephone Briefings	Continuous	Provide frequent project updates to internal and external stakeholders.	Public Forest Service employees
Project Webpage	Continuous	Provide information to internal and external stakeholders.	Public Forest Service employees
Project Newsletters	As needed	Provide important information to internal and external stakeholders at critical stages of process.	Public Forest Service employees
Mailings and Emails	As needed	Provide important information to internal and external stakeholders.	Public
News Releases	As needed	Draw attention of internal and external stakeholders at critical stages of the process.	Public Forest Service employees
Media	As needed	Draw attention of internal and	

		external stakeholders.	
Field Trips	As needed	Forum to discuss on-the-ground issues with the public.	Public
Presentations to Groups	As requested	Provide information to interested groups or individuals.	Public
Public Meeting to develop Purpose and Need	Sep. 14 and 15, 2005	Have public provide input to Forest Supervisor before finalizing purpose and need.	Public
Public Meeting to explain Public Scoping	Dec. 14, 2005	Explain public scoping and have public provide input to Forest Supervisor before finalizing set of significant issues.	Public
Public Meeting to explain Developed Alternatives	March 2006	Explain developed alternatives and have public provide input to Forest Supervisor before finalizing set of alternatives.	Public
Public Meeting to explain Draft EIS	May 2006	Explain details of the Draft EIS and explain how to provide substantive comments.	Public

Revisions of this plan must be approved by the Forest Supervisor. A flow chart representation of the public engagement process is attached in a separate file.